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Sermon Notes

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God's Wisdom in Election Humbles the World

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

A number of years ago, I watched an episode of a popular program called "**lifestyles of the rich and famous.**" They would take their viewers into the mansions and daily lives of the "beautiful people," the "jet set," the "elite," the "crème de la crème," of our generation. You could see their lavish provisions, the stunning real estate and scenic vistas and overpowering architecture of the wealthiest people in the world...

The show eventually morphed into a spinoff on VH1 called "The Fabulous Life of...", following the daily lives and possessions and pleasures and VIP treatment of singers, movie stars, Fortune 500 CEOs, powerful leaders, cultural icons, the "A-listers"

The "movers and shakers" is one phrase usually associated with this class of people

Every generation has had those people... the ones everyone wants to know, whose opinion are sought, whose decisions shape the lives of everyone around them for years to come, whose patterns of consumption soar far beyond the conception of the overwhelming majority of people in the world

England is still enthralled with their Royal Family... their weddings still attract overwhelming attention, and people follow their daily moves with tremendous interest... they are among the most famous "movers and shakers" in the world

America has had them too... and I have toured some of the leftovers from their extravagant lives... the Newport, Rhode Island

mansions of the “robber barons” of the 19th century... not to mention the Biltmore Estate of Cornelius Vanderbilt

They existed in Paul’s day as well... the noble classes, the ruling elite, the overwhelmingly rich, the famous, the scholars and philosophers of Greece whose insights illuminated the ancient world

In this section of scripture, Paul makes it plain that God purposely did NOT choose many of such people for his church

This runs directly contrary to the wisdom of the world... the world’s wisdom is seen in trusting in HUMAN POWER... human personality, human wealth, human ingenuity, human politics, human military force... human power to build a human empire

The Corinthian church, though converted to Christ by the gospel, still were thinking in a WORLDLY WAY about many things... this was seen in their divisions – the factions – that had formed along the lines of following “great men”

They were breaking into factions: “I follow Paul”; “I follow Apollos”; “I follow Peter”... their whole way of thinking about great leaders and about the gospel itself was polluted by WORLDLY thinking... thinking “according to the flesh” as he puts it in our passage this morning

Paul HAS to correct them! He HAS to show them that God’s whole way of dealing with sinful humanity is to HUMBLE our devilish pride, to make us lowly and meek and submissive to his infinite greatness... so that we will not continue to imitate the DEVIL who was so filled with self-love and pride that he sought to ascend to the heights and topple God from his lofty throne

So 1 Corinthians 1-2 show how God saves us in ways that seem foolish and weak and shameful... the FIRST STEP in his argument is the message of the cross... of Jesus Christ crucified... foolishness to the Greeks and an offensive

stumbling block to the Greeks, but to those who are being saved the wisdom of God and the power of God

The SECOND STEP in his argument is the Corinthian church itself... made up of unimpressive people who were NOT the “best and the brightest,” NOT the “movers and the shakers,” NOT the “beautiful people” who lived “lifestyles of the rich and famous”... instead, they were those generally despised by those people

Paul’s overall goal: to teach the Corinthians to think about God and themselves according to true divine wisdom, not the wisdom of this world...

I. God’s Wisdom in Calling Not Many “Movers and Shakers” (vs. 26)

A. Paul Asks the Corinthians to Consider their Own Condition

1 Corinthians 1:26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

1. Paul is not trying to humiliate them, but to get them to think of themselves properly... with SOBER JUDGMENT
2. God’s strategy was not to choose the “best and the brightest” from every city in every generation

That phase – the “best and the brightest” – came from the time of President John F. Kennedy as referring to his cabinet posts and staffers... academics and intellectuals chosen by JFK for his administration... a new generation of America’s talented young leaders – they were called “whiz kids”, prodigies of industry and academia who were to lead America into the high-tech, space-age future

3. Paul wants the Corinthians to look honestly at themselves when they were called... they were COMMONERS, ordinary people, perhaps even below average in intelligence and influence, in birth and cultural influence, in money and political power

B. “When You Were Called”

1. The word “called” is very significant theologically
2. It signifies to sovereign activity of God in saving sinners

Romans 8:29-30 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

3. God had a plan before the foundation of the world to choose some people out to be conformed to the likeness of his Son
4. The “calling” of God in the life of an elect person begins the moment he/she is born, and continues until they are converted...
5. It is the powerful, wise hidden process whereby God lures a sinner out of Satan’s dark kingdom into the Kingdom of Light... of Jesus Christ; in the many years that precedes conversion, it involves insights and experiences that prepare the person eventually to come to Christ
6. But the calling Paul means here is the last, decisive step... God calling the sinner from death to life by hearing the word of Christ; When you were called from death to life, consider yourselves... what was your situation in the world? Did God call you because you were so awesome, so amazing?
7. Actually, he specifically chose you in part based on your earthly circumstance as being NOT wise, influential, of noble birth...

Elementary school, choosing sides for KICKBALL... two team captains would be chosen, usually the BEST ATHLETES, and they would alternate and draft their team... usually the next best athletes would be chosen first all the way down to the last person... it was a SHAMEFUL THING to be the last person chosen for kickball... it meant you stunk at kickball, and everyone knew it

Amazingly, as God was assembling his family, he purposely chose people that most people didn't want, to humiliate the "powers that be" ... to humble human pride

C. Wise by Human Standards

1. ESV: "according to worldly standards" ... but the phrase is literally "according to the flesh"
2. "The flesh" for Paul meant the anti-God perspective; the normal human life perspective; the way the unsaved world looks at it
3. The Corinthians were not world class philosophers or scholars or super-intelligent at all
4. No one was traveling down from Athens to sit at their feet and drink in their wisdom; no scribes were gathering around them to copy their pearls of insight for future generations
5. They were just average people living average intellectual lives

D. Paul also adds: "not many powerful, not many of noble birth"

1. The "powerful" might refer to physical strength, although it could also be political clout ... a leader in the community
2. The Corinthians were not the policy shapers of their city-state; their decrees carried no weight; their opinions on the hottest issues of the day were irrelevant to public policy
3. They were not the "movers and the shakers" ... they were more the "moved and the shaken" ... the policies of Gallio, the Roman proconsul there in Corinth were made without consulting them
4. The "noble birth" referred to their financial standing as well as their family heritage ... families of renown, with a long-standing reputation of ancestral achievements, great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers who were the civic leaders for the last three generations
5. They were not the moneyed class, with buying power to make things happen by bribing officials or start businesses which would employ hundreds of fellow citizens

6. They were poor, uninfluential people... with no family ties to lean back on; they were what the British royalty today calls “Commoners”

E. An Eternity of Difference between “Not MANY” and “Not ANY”

1. There were SOME wealthy and influential people in that congregation...
2. Crispus, the synagogue ruler believed, as did his whole family; Stephanas and Gaius seemed to be homeowners and somewhat wealthy
3. Worldwide, and throughout church history, there have been a very few geniuses who bowed their knees to Christ (like Augustine, and John Calvin and Blaise Pascal and even—perhaps-Isaac Newton); a very few rulers who were truly Christian kings, like Charlemagne and good King Wenceslas; a very few heads of state like Abraham Kuyper of the Netherlands; a very few truly wealthy people like RG LeTourneau and Selina Hastings (the Countess of Huntingdon who used her money and influence to start an evangelical college in England and support missions and start dozens of churches); very few noble-born leaders like William Wilberforce who used his position to end the slave trade in England
4. For those and handful of others in church history, we can THANK GOD that God overlooked their wealth, and intellect and power and influence and genuinely converted them; whereupon they used those advantages in the service of the Kingdom of Christ; these will ETERNALLY THANK GOD that it was “NOT MANY,” rather than “NOT ANY”
5. BUT PERCENTAGE-WISE, it is NOT MANY... a small percentage of people in the world become Christians at all... an even smaller percentage of them are wealthy or powerful or brilliant or talented or acclaimed in this world

II. God’s Actions in Electing the “Foolish Things” (vs. 27)

1 Corinthians 1:27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

A. God Chose

1. This brings us to the doctrine of election
2. God assembles his church as he sees fit... he CHOOSES people to be Christians
3. As he will say very plainly at the end of the chapter,

1 Corinthians 1:30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus

4. It is not an accident, and it is NOT your unaided free will, as though you just up and decided to become a Christian one day

John 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear eternal fruit

5. Even more amazing, the scripture teaches us that God made his choice before the foundation of the world

Ephesians 1:4-6 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us ... to the praise of his glorious grace

6. The doctrine of SOVEREIGN ELECTION is taught clearly as well... that God did not choose us based on any righteousness or accomplishments or positive attributes he saw in us... clearly, because he chose us before we were even born
7. As Paul states based on the choice of Jacob over Esau

Romans 9:11-12 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad-- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls

B. Not “Unconditional Election” but Sovereign Election

1. Many Calvinists use the term “unconditional election” to teach this idea that God’s choice of us was not based on anything POSITIVE he found in us
2. However, the idea of UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION might imply that God made his choices somewhat IRRATIONALLY or

RANDOMLY, as though no thought whatsoever went into the choice...

3. That is not true...

- a. Revelation 7 makes it plain that God will have some elect people from every nation and tribe and language on earth... so some people were chosen specifically because they were from that particular people group... no people group will be accidentally or randomly omitted from the heavenly roster
 - b. And here in 1 Corinthians 1, God shows that he has a very clear reason for choosing people who were NOT MANY wise, not many influential, not many of noble birth
 - c. God specifically chose millions of poor people, millions of uneducated people, millions of peasants and farmers and manual laborers and invalids and
- C. God Has a PURPOSE Here... It is NOT AN ACCIDENT that the overwhelming majority of Christians are so unimpressive according to the world's standards
- D. God's Ways Are NOT Our Ways

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Romans 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 34 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

- i) In other words, God's mind is infinitely deep, and his judgments are unfathomable
- ii) From that amazingly deep mind come paths that we cannot track... we can't follow what he's doing... like in the 19th century west, a tracker can easily follow a herd of wild

buffalos... no big challenge there; but a mountain goat that leaps from rock to rock is very difficult to track

iii) God's paths are extremely hard to follow

2. So when it comes to assembling the church of Jesus Christ, God is not going to follow worldly wisdom of who to choose for his team

We tend to think, "If only the star quarterback, or the genius scientist, or the famous rock star, or the influential legislator, or the staggeringly wealthy entrepreneur could become a Christian... they could use all that power and wealth and influence and personal charisma to win so many souls to Christ."

That's exactly the kind of thinking God is exposing and crushing here!

3. The gospel is for the HUMBLE and LOWLY... the little children and the poor outcasts, and for any who become lowly and realize they are poor and outcast when it comes to the Kingdom of God
4. Jesus' brothers wanted to give him advice about how to run his ministry and his Kingdom

John 7:3-5 Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. ⁴ No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." ⁵ For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

5. It is a sign of unbelief to think that God needs our advice or help or any combination of human ingenuity or power or initiative
 6. Having the "best and the brightest" does not ensure success... only God's mysterious ways will produce success
- E. God's Purpose is that the elect will be saved in such a way that human pride is HUMBLED and God alone will be glorified
1. Clear example: Gideon

Judges 7:2-4 The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her,³ announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men.

He weeded out 300 who lapped water like dogs... that was the job description... the criteria of how the 300 got selected. After God worked an amazing deliverance from the Midianites, if you asked the 300 what did you do, how did you get selected? "I lapped water like a dog, so I was chosen. Then I stood there with no sword in my hand, but only a torch and jar and trumpet... and I smashed the jar and blew the trumpet, and the Midianites killed each other. I did nothing; God did it all."

III. God Shames and Nullifies the Arrogance of Man (vs. 27-29)

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.

A. Here are the Negative Purpose Statements...

1. We just saw that God was doing all this PURPOSELY... this was not an accident, the fact that NOT MANY were wise or influential or of noble birth
2. There was nothing accidental about it, as though something were wrong with the message, and if only we could tweak the product or the marketing approach we could win more wealthy, powerful, influential people into the Kingdom
3. The purpose of God here was an act of violence on the idols of human hearts
4. Look at the words he uses... to SHAME and to NULLIFY the "powers that be"... to shame the arrogance of humanity

- 5. God's goal: SO THAT NO ONE WILL BOAST BEFORE HIM
 - a. He wants to humble the sinful human race into realizing that they are first and foremost CREATURES and he is the CREATOR; secondly, to remember that we have REBELLED against him and are only saved by his lavish grace in Christ
 - b. So he works in a marvelous way to humble us as a race
 - B. God Chose the FOOLISH things of the world to SHAME the wise
 - 1. He rejects the worldly philosophers... the great names of Greece, and their worldly systems of wisdom
 - 2. He rejects the ruminations of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates
 - 3. God cannot be known by human intellect, but only by humble FAITH that accepts that we know nothing except that God teaches it to us
 - 4. The SHAMING of the wise will be complete on Judgment Day, when these foolish Christians who believed the foolish cross and the foolishness of a dead Savior will be glorified and exalted and taught the secrets of the universe from the mind of God... while the arrogant boastful geniuses are cast out into condemnation
 - C. God Chose the WEAK to SHAME the Strong
 - 1. Strong men have used their power to build overwhelming empires throughout all of human history
 - 2. God is choosing to build a Kingdom a radically different way... with meek, lowly people whom the world despises
- Matthew 5:3-5 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***
- a. The “poor in spirit” are the spiritual beggars
 - b. Those who “mourn” are those whose deepest grief is their own sin

- c. The “meek” are the humble and lowly in heart... these people usually get trampled on and slaughtered by the powerful empire builders... tyrants like the Nazis LOVE meek, humble people who simply kneel and bow their heads and let the tyrants slaughter them

When the Vikings used to go marauding up and down the coastlines of Europe, they loved the monasteries the best because they were filled with gold and silver, and with priests in linen robes who never fought back... they just simply slaughtered them and took their possessions

The same thing happened to the church in Japan during the 17th century, when the shoguns would torture and slaughter the Christians, having absolutely no respect for how weak they were, how easily they died

- 3. How does God’s selection of the weak SHAME the strong?
 - a. Because he shows who will be vindicated on Judgment Day...
 - b. When most of the worldly wise and the powerful and the influential and the rich and the moneyed are cast out and thrown into hell... then the poor and meek and lowly will be absolutely VINDICATED when they INHERIT THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH

IV. God’s Sovereignty in Assembling the Church of Christ (vs. 30)

1 Corinthians 1:30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus

- A. This is one of the clearest assertions of DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY in human salvation in the Bible
 - 1. To be “in Christ Jesus” = to be redeemed, to be born again, to have been rescued from Satan’s dark kingdom and brought into the Kingdom of Light... to no longer be seen in ADAM as a dying sinner, but in Christ as a redeemed saint
 - 2. That’s what it means to be IN CHRIST JESUS

- B. Paul says it is BECAUSE OF HIM that that is true of you, if it is true of you
 - 1. The “him” is God the Father
 - 2. God the Father chose you and sent his Spirit to transform you so that you would believe in Christ
 - 3. The ultimate reason you are a Christian is BECAUSE OF GOD, not because of yourself
- C. Sovereign Election is openly asserted here... in part because it is very HUMBLING to be told this... “I saved you and rescued you by changing your insane mind to see the truth of the cross of Christ”
- D. The Holy Spirit is God’s agent to make this happen

1 Corinthians 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

So... the person WITH THE SPIRIT does indeed accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are NO LONGER foolishness to him but have been revealed to be WISDOM, and he CAN understand them because he has been healed by the Spirit to make a proper evaluation of Jesus Christ

THE SPIRIT HAS SAVED YOU into Christ!!

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus!!

V. God’s Ultimate Purpose: Humble Worship from Redeemed Sinners (vs. 30-31)

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

- A. When the Spirit Changes our Hearts, He Draws us INTO CHRIST

- B. Then Christ becomes for us WISDOM from God...
- C. More than that... Christ becomes OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS
 - 1. This is the essence of the doctrine of JUSTIFICATION...
 - 2. Christ IS our righteousness
 - 3. God sees us IN CHRIST as perfectly righteous, as perfectly obedient to his laws as Christ was
- D. Christ has become also our HOLINESS as well... that is our sanctification... our growth in holiness is growth into Christlikeness... Christ IS our practical holiness, worked in us by the Spirit
- E. Christ is also our REDEMPTION: the blood purchase by which we have been rescued from slavery to sin and death and have now become SLAVES of God
- F. God Does all this “for the PRAISE OF HIS GLORY”
 - 1. That we will BOAST in the Lord and in no other
 - 2. This “boasting” = worship... speaking words of praise and honor
 - 3. “MY Savior is infinitely great, perfectly wise, he has done great things... I cannot stop speaking of his greatness and also his meekness and wisdom
 - 4. Our mouths will be filled with BOASTS of the Lord, praising the perfections of Christ for dying on the cross for us
 - 5. Banished from heaven will be the arrogance and pride that leads to selfish boasting on earth: “I’m greater,” “I’m smarter” “I’m stronger”, “I’m more beautiful.”
 - 6. The cross of Christ ends that boasting forever!!

VI. Applications

- A. See the Wisdom of God in HUMBLING us as a human race
 - 1. This should quiet us and make us lowly in our own eyes

2. Human pride is so insufferable
3. Whenever you see pride rearing its ugly head in your life, crush it with meditations on the Cross!
4. When you are tempted to get angry at your spouse during a conflict, stop and pray and say, “Lord, remind me of the lessons of the cross! Humble me now, before I say anything based on pride and anger”
5. When you are tempted to tell a story in which you are the hero and your skills won the day, STOP... “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!”

B. Spend More Time Worshiping Christ for His Greatness

1. Quiet times: ask the Holy Spirit to move in you to worship the greatness of Christ
2. Throughout the day, pray again and again prayers of worship of Christ’s wisdom, Christ’s love expressed in his kindness to you

C. Evangelism as BOASTING in the Lord

1. We should look on evangelism as an act of speaking the praise of Christ in the hearing of others
2. Let us boast in the great love of Christ displayed in the cross
3. Let us boast in the great power of Christ displayed in his resurrection from the dead!
4. TO THE LOST: let me call on you right now to trust in Christ for the salvation of your souls!!

D. Let Us STOP ESTEEMING the “movers and shakers” the “best and the brightest” and let us stop coveting the “lifestyles of the rich and famous”

1. Let us not think like the world does, that if we can only win some wealthy people or some leaders or CEOs or the quarterback on the football team, the cause of Christ would be greatly assisted...

2. God LOVES to work through ordinary people to spread the kingdom!